

## GUIDELINES FOR ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Adapted from a handout written by Allen Buchinski, Santa Clara Master Gardener Hotline program

Recommendations for answering Hotline questions:

### Approach and Tone

- We educate and offer choices, but we do not make the choices for the caller/emailer. Master Gardeners suggest and educate with *research-based* information
- Be careful about saying “We (UCANR) recommend...”. When possible, describe options with their pros and cons. Make suggestions instead.
- Regarding using pesticides, use the IPM approach, which may include the use of pesticides. When in doubt, locate specific references in the UC IPM website.
- Be careful about congratulating a person on the decision to do a certain thing (remove their lawn, for example). Rejoice privately! Keep the response professional.
- Answer (or address) the question asked:
  - Without personal bias/judgement (such as advising them to take out their lawn when they are asking how to get rid of weeds in their lawn)
  - And keeping the bigger picture in mind (a weed ID question can lead to weed management information)
- Be respectful and professional when talking about other organizations, especially our partner government agencies
- Write/talk as though your answer will appear on the front page of tomorrow’s paper

# General Guidelines

- Always use “We” not “I”. You are representing UCCE, not yourself.
- Try to include links to UC reference material. Ask the caller for their email to send. Every question is an opportunity to introduce our UC content to the public.
- It is okay to acknowledge uncertainty. If you are not 100% sure, say so. Then use this team as a resource to find the answer.
- Document any research/actions that you have done.
- Answer email with proper spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Be careful when sharing personal experience:
  - Is it supported by a UC reference or other peer reviewed site.
  - If it is, provide the reference and consider whether the personal experience is relevant.
  - If not, consider a caveat (for example: while we don’t have a UC reference for this, we’ve seen .....)
- Do not provide product information without a UC reference (for example the UC IPM video on setting a gophinator trap).
- Do not recommend particular businesses, services or products. (for example “Just head to Home Depot for Spinosad”).

## What links are appropriate

Try to lead the client to IPM websites and other good sources by incorporating links. Information sources in order of priority.

- #1 Peer-reviewed UC links.
- Other peer reviewed .edu sites. Just be aware of climate differences.
- Botanic gardens, garden associations and professional sites.
- **Avoid** blogs, consumer sites and product advertisements